CHAPTER XXVII

GROWING A VOCABULARY

Boys flying kites haul in their white winged birds;
You can't do that way when you're flying words.
"Careful with fire," is good advice we know,
"Careful with words," is ten times doubly so.
Thoughts unexpressed many sometimes fall back dead;
But God Himself can't kill them when they're said.

—WILL CARLETON, *The First Settler's Story.*

The term "vocabulary" has a special as well as a general meaning. True, *all* vocabularies are grounded in the everyday words of the language, out of which grow the special vocabularies, but each such specialized group possesses a number of words of peculiar value for its own objects. These words may be used in other vocabularies also, but the fact that they are suited to a unique order of expression marks them as of special value to a particular craft or calling.

In this respect the public speaker differs not at all from the poet, the novelist, the scientist, the traveler. He must add to his everyday stock, words of value for the public presentation of thought. "A study of the discourses of effective orators discloses the fact that they have a fondness for words signifying power, largeness, speed, action, color, light, and all their opposites. They frequently employ words expressive of the various emotions. Descriptive words, adjectives used in *fresh* relations with nouns, and apt epithets, are freely employed. Indeed, the nature of public speech permits the use of mildly exaggerated words which, by the time they have reached the hearer's judgment, will leave only a just impression.[1]"

Form the Book-Note Habit

To possess a word involves three things: To know its special and broader meanings, to know its relation to other words, and to be able to use it. When you see or hear a familiar word used in an unfamiliar sense, jot it down, look it up, and master it. We have in mind a speaker of superior attainments who acquired his vocabulary by noting all new words he heard or read. These he mastered and *put into use.* Soon his vocabulary became large, varied, and exact. Use a new word accurately five times and it is yours. Professor Albert E. Hancock says: "An author's vocabulary is of two kinds, latent and dynamic: latent—those words he understands; dynamic—those he can readily use. Every intelligent man *knows* all the words he needs, but he may not have them all ready for active service. The problem of literary diction consists in turning the latent into the dynamic." Your dynamic vocabulary is the one you must especially cultivate.

In his essay on "A College Magazine" in the volume, *Memories and Portraits,* Stevenson shows how he rose from imitation to originality in the use of words. He had particular reference to the formation of his literary style, but words are the raw materials of style, and his excellent example may well be followed judiciously by the public speaker. Words *in their relations* are vastly more important than words considered singly.

> Whenever I read a book or a passage that particularly pleased me, in which a thing was said or an effect rendered with propriety, in which there was either some conspicuous force or some happy distinction in the style, I must sit down at once and set myself to ape that quality. I was unsuccessful, and I knew it; and tried again, and was again unsuccessful, and always unsuccessful; but at least in these vain bouts I got some practice in rhythm, in harmony, in construction and coordination of parts.
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> I have thus played the sedulous ape to Hazlitt, to Lamb, to Wordsworth, to Sir Thomas Browne, to Defoe, to Hawthorne, to Montaigne.
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> That, like it or not, is the way to learn to write; whether I have profited or not, that is the way. It was the way Keats learned, and there never was a finer temperament for literature than Keats'.
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> It is the great point of these imitations that there still shines beyond the student's reach, his inimitable model. Let him try as he please, he is still sure of failure; and it is an old and very true saying that failure is the only highroad to success.

Form the Reference-Book Habit

Do not be content with your general knowledge of a word—press your study until you have mastered its individual shades of meaning and usage. Mere fluency is sure to become despicable, but accuracy never. The dictionary contains the crystallized usage of intellectual giants. No one who would write effectively dare despise its definitions and discriminations. Think, for example, of the different meanings of *mantle*, or *model*, or *quantity.* Any late edition of an unabridged dictionary is good, and is worth making sacrifices to own.

Books of synonyms and antonyms—used cautiously, for there are few *perfect* synonyms in any language—will be found of great help. Consider the shades of meanings among such word-groups as *thief, peculator, defaulter, embezzler, burglar, yeggman, robber, bandit, marauder, pirate,* and many more; or the distinctions among *Hebrew, Jew, Israelite, and Semite.* Remember that no book of synonyms is trustworthy unless used with a dictionary. "A Thesaurus of the English Language," by Dr. Francis A. March, is expensive, but full and authoritative. Of smaller books of synonyms and antonyms there are plenty.[1]

Study the connectives of English speech. Fernald's book on this title is a mine of gems. Unsuspected pitfalls lie in the loose use of *and, or, for, while,* and a score of tricky little connectives.

Word derivations are rich in suggestiveness. Our English owes so much to foreign tongues and has changed so much with the centuries that whole addresses may grow out of a single root-idea hidden away in an ancient word-origin. Translation, also, is excellent exercise in word-mastery and consorts well with the study of derivations.

Phrase books that show the origins of familiar expressions will surprise most of us by showing how carelessly everyday speech is used. Brewer's "A Dictionary of Phrase, and Fable," Edwards' "Words, Facts, and Phrases," and Thornton's "An American Glossary," are all good—the last, an expensive work in three volumes.

A prefix or a suffix may essentially change the force of the stem, as in *master-ful* and *master-ly, contempt-ible* and *contempt-uous*, *envi-ous* and *envi-able.* Thus to study words in groups, according to their stems, prefixes, and suffixes, is to gain a mastery over their shades of meaning, and introduce us to other related words.

Do not Favor one Set or Kind of Words more than Another

"Sixty years and more ago, Lord Brougham, addressing the students of the University of Glasgow, laid down the rule that the native (Anglo-Saxon) part of our vocabulary was to be favored at the expense of that other part which has come from the Latin and Greek. The rule was an impossible one, and Lord Brougham himself never tried seriously to observe it; nor, in truth, has any great writer made the attempt. Not only is our language highly composite, but the component words have, in De Quincey's phrase, 'happily coalesced.' It is easy to jest at words in *-osity* and *-ation,* as 'dictionary' words, and the like. But even Lord Brougham would have found it difficult to dispense with *pomposity* and *imagination*."[1]

The short, vigorous Anglo-Saxon will always be preferred for passages of special thrust and force, just as the Latin will continue to furnish us with flowing and smooth expressions; to mingle all sorts, however, will give variety—and that is most to be desired.

Discuss Words With Those Who Know Them

Since the language of the platform follows closely the diction of everyday speech, many useful words may be acquired in conversation with cultivated men, and when such discussion takes the form of disputation as to the meanings and usages of words, it will prove doubly valuable. The development of word-power marches with the growth of individuality.

Search Faithfully for the Right Word

Books of reference are tripled in value when their owner has a passion for getting the kernels out of their shells. Ten minutes a day will do wonders for the nut-cracker. “I am growing so peevish about my writing,” says Flaubert. “I am like a man whose ear is true, but who plays falsely on the violin: his fingers refuse to reproduce precisely those sounds of which he has the inward sense. Then the tears come rolling down from the poor scraper’s eyes and the bow falls from his hand.”

The same brilliant Frenchman sent this sound advice to his pupil, Guy de Maupassant: “Whatever may be the thing which one wishes to say, there is but one word for expressing it, only one verb to animate it, only one adjective to qualify it. It is essential to search for this word, for this verb, for this adjective, until they are discovered, and to be satisfied with nothing else.”

Walter Savage Landor once wrote: “I hate false words, and seek with care, difficulty, and moroseness those that fit the thing.” So did Sentimental Tommy, as related by James M. Barrie in his novel bearing his hero’s name as a title. No wonder T. Sandys became an author and a lion!

Tommy, with another lad, is writing an essay on “A Day in Church,” in competition for a university scholarship. He gets on finely until he pauses for lack of a word. For nearly an hour he searches for this elusive thing, until suddenly he is told that the allotted time is up, and he has lost! Barrie may tell the rest:

> Essay! It was no more an essay than a twig is a tree, for the gowk had stuck in the middle of his second page. Yes, stuck is the right expression, as his chagrined teacher had to admit when the boy was cross-examined. He had not been “up to some of his tricks;” he had stuck, and his explanations, as you will admit, merely emphasized his incapacity.
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> He had brought himself to public scorn for lack of a word. What word? they asked testily; but even now he could not tell. He had wanted a Scotch word that would signify how many people were in church, and it was on the tip of his tongue, but would come no farther. Puckle was nearly the word,

but it did not mean so many people as he meant. The hour had gone by just like winking; he had forgotten all about time while searching his mind for the word.

. . . . . .

The other five [examiners] were furious. . . . "You little tattie doolie," Cathro roared, "were there not a dozen words to wile from if you had an ill-will to puckle? What ailed you at manzy, or—"

"I thought of manzy," replied Tommy, woefully, for he was ashamed of himself, "but—but a manzy's a swarm. It would mean that the folk in the kirk were buzzing thegither like bees, instead of sitting still."

"Even if it does mean that," said Mr. Duthie, with impatience, "what was the need of being so particular? Surely the art of essay-writing consists in using the first word that comes and hurrying on."

"That's how I did," said the proud McLauchlan [Tommy's successful competitor]. . . .

"I see," interposed Mr. Gloag, "that McLauchlan speaks of there being a mask of people in the church. Mask is a fine Scotch word."

"I thought of mask," whimpered Tommy, "but that would mean the kirk was crammed, and I just meant it to be middling full."

"Flow would have done," suggested Mr. Lorrimer.

"Flow's but a handful," said Tommy.

"Curran, then, you jackanapes!"

"Curran's no enough."

Mr. Lorrimer flung up his hands in despair.

"I wanted something between curran and mask," said Tommy, doggedly, yet almost at the crying.

Mr. Ogilvy, who had been hiding his admiration with difficulty, spread a net for him. "You said you wanted a word that meant middling full. Well, why did you not say middling full—or fell mask?"

"Yes, why not?" demanded the ministers, unconsciously caught in the net.

"I wanted one word," replied Tommy, unconsciously avoiding it.

"You jewel!" muttered Mr. Ogilvy under his breath, but Mr. Cathro would have banged the boy's head had not the ministers interfered.

"It is so easy, too, to find the right word," said Mr. Gloag.

"It's no; it's difficult as to hit a squirrel," cried Tommy, and again Mr. Ogilvy nodded approval.

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And then an odd thing happened. As they were preparing to leave the school [Cathro having previously run Tommy out by the neck], the door opened a little and there appeared in the aperture the face of Tommy, tear-stained but excited. "I ken the word now," he cried, "it came to me a' at once; it is hantle!"

Mr. Ogilvy .... said in an ecstasy to himself, "He *had* to think of it till he got it—and he got it. The laddie is a genius!"

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. What is the derivation of the word *vocabulary?*

2. Briefly discuss any complete speech given in this volume, with reference to (*a*) exactness, (*b*) variety, and (*c*) charm, in the use of words.

3. Give original examples of the kinds of word-studies referred to on pages 337 and 338.

4. Deliver a short talk on any subject, using at least five words which have not been previously in your "dynamic" vocabulary.

5. Make a list of the unfamiliar words found in any address you may select.

6. Deliver a short extemporaneous speech giving your opinions on the merits and demerits of the use of unusual words in public speaking.

7. Try to find an example of the over-use of unusual words in a speech.

8. Have you used reference books in word studies? If so, state with what result.

9. Find as many synonyms and antonyms as possible for each of the following words: Excess, Rare, Severe, Beautiful, Clear, Happy, Difference, Care, Skillful, Involve, Enmity, Profit, Absurd, Evident, Faint, Friendly, Harmony, Hatred, Honest, Inherent.

[1] *How to Attract and Hold an Audience*, J. Berg Esenwein.

[1] A book of synonyms and antonyms is in preparation for this series, "The Writer's Library."

[1] *Composition and Rhetoric*, J. M. Hart.